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SUBJECT: POLL REFLECTS GROWING CONCERN OVER ECONOMY

REF: MINSK 846

Summary

1. (SBU) According to the latest data from the independent pollster NOVAK, the percentage of the Belarusian public with a positive rating of President Lukashenko has held steady at 41.7 percent. This is the first pause in a yearlong downward trend. Support for opposition politicians, however, remains weak. There has been a marked rise in dissatisfaction with the economic situation since April, with 24 percent of respondents reporting a worsened economic situation in general, 25 percent stating that their personal living standard has declined, and only 12.7 percent evaluating the economic situation in the country as "good." Only one-third of those polled were aware of the European March that took place on October 14. End summary.

Support For President Declining...

2. (SBU) Andrey Vardomatskiy, Director of the independent polling service NOVAK, delivered to Poloff the results of his October 20-31 polling. The survey had a nationwide sample of 1,144 and 3 percent margin of error. According to the NOVAK data, the president's positive ratings have fallen slowly but consistently since November 2006 (reftel). Public support for him now stands at 41.7 percent, a level roughly the same as last month. However, there continues to be little enthusiasm for political alternatives. Support for de facto coalition leader Aleksandr Milinkevich and jailed presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin remains in the low single digits.

...While Worries About the Economy Increase

3. (SBU) Together with a decline in support for the president is a worsening perception of the economic situation in Belarus. Dissatisfaction with the economy has risen significantly since April, with 24 percent of respondents reporting a worsened economic situation in general, and 25.5 percent stating that their personal living standard has declined (up from 13.1 and 15.1 percent respectively since April). Only 12.7 percent of respondents rated the economic situation as "good," a drop from 20.9 percent the previous month and significantly lower than the 31 percent peak in May 2006. Although worries about the economic situation are at their highest level since May, 2004 -- with the exception of a sudden spike inspired by Gazprom's gas rate hikes last January -- only 12 percent of respondents stated they would personally participate in demonstrations to protest the worsening situation.

Little Support For European March

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¶4. (SBU) Only one-third of respondents had heard of the October 14 European March in support of the European Union's twelve-point strategy for closer integration, and 71.7 percent were unaware of what those recommendations were. Reaction to the march was lukewarm -- only 20 percent of respondents supported the March. Of those who had heard about the march, over half stated their main source of information was official government media. However, when informed of the twelve specific European conditions for closer integration, 65.8 percent of respondents supported them in principle, though only 31.6 percent would vote for joining the European Union. Support for joining the Union had been holding steady, but has fallen from 39.2 percent since March.

Comment  
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¶5. (SBU) According to this data -- which is necessarily difficult to collect in a dictatorship, and confirms that regime's hold on the media -- support for Lukashenko has gradually declined over the past year, while there is still little enthusiasm for the opposition. Support for the president is clearly being affected by Belarusians' fears about the economy; an area of concern that the opposition has admittedly not capitalized on. Future data may indicate what effect further economic problems -- additional cuts in benefits, increased fuel prices, factory layoffs, and a cold winter -- have on the dictator's standing.

Moore